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SUBJECT: DMK CALLS OFF THREAT TO PULL SUPPORT FROM UPA OVER SRI LANKA VIOLENCE

REF: A) CHENNAI 362 B) CHENNAI 344

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Chief Minister Karunanidhi backed down from his threat to have Tamil Nadu's Members of Parliament resign if India did not force a ceasefire in Sri Lanka before October 28. The resignation drama has helped distract attention from the DMK party's woes in advance of next years Parliamentary elections. The political crisis has introduced some tension into the DMK/Congress relationship, which remains strong because of the parties' mutual interest in supporting one another. End summary.

Karunanidhi backs down

¶2. (SBU) On October 14, Tamil Nadu Members of Parliament agreed at an "all-party meeting" chaired by DMK Chief Minister Karunanidhi to resign en masse if the Government of India failed to force a ceasefire in Sri Lanka by October 28 (ref B). But on October 26, two days before the deadline, Karunanidhi backed down after a visit from External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee. Mukherjee's visit, coupled with several other actions by the central government -- including summoning the Sri Lankan High Commissioner, engaging with Sri Lanka's Special Envoy, and agreeing to send humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka's Tamils -- appear to have mollified Karunanidhi. According to media reports, Karunanidhi said "he (Mukherjee) suggested we defer the decision (to resign) now; I gave him that assurance." Karunanidhi also acknowledged that "this issue has been going on for 40 years; we cannot expect it to be resolved in four days." At an event the next day inaugurating a road named after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was assassinated by the Tamil Tigers in Chennai in 1991, Karunanidhi said that the DMK had no difference of opinion with the Union Government on the Sri Lanka issue.

An idle threat by Karunanidhi?

¶3. (SBU) Observers from across the spectrum scoffed at the notion that Karunanidhi ever intended to actually allow the MPs to resign. Peter Alphonse, a Tamil Nadu Congress Party leader, told post that Karunanidhi would never have pulled the MPs from the UPA. According to Alphonse, Karunanidhi wanted to show-up his political opponents who expected the all-party meeting to be a routine one issuing a typical, toothless hortatory resolution. But, according to Alphonse, Karunanidhi never would have carried out the threat because the DMK has no option but to stick with the UPA and the Congress.

¶4. (SBU) Dayanidhi Maran, a DMK Member of Parliament who was stripped of his position as Union Minister for Information Technology and Telecommunications by his grand-uncle Karunanidhi in 2007, agreed that the Chief Minister's resignation threat was an idle one. Maran called it a "drama" staged by Karunanidhi, noting that he too tendered his resignation despite his estrangement from the Chief Minister. Maran said that Karunanidhi's main objective was to distract attention from the state's recent power outages, which have increased anger against the incumbent government to an all-time high.

A fissure in strong DMK/Congress relationship?

¶5. (SBU) The resignation threat has put stress on an otherwise strong relationship between the DMK and Congress. At the local

level, Alphonse said the Tamil Nadu Congress was irritated that Karunanidhi appeared to be slipping back into his past tendency to be "soft" on the terrorist Tamil Tigers and the small Tamil Nadu political parties that support them. "We were all afraid that Karunanidhi fell into the trap of the small pro-LTTE parties. They were pushing him to take an aggressive stand on this issue by playing on his projected image of the father of world Tamils." That said, Alphonse said the DMK and Karunanidhi were no longer soft on the Tamil Tigers after having been "burned" politically by popular revulsion against the Rajiv Gandhi assassination.

¶6. (SBU) Maran claimed Karunanidhi's attempt at "blackmail" has alienated the Congress high command, especially Sonia Gandhi. According to Maran, who despite having an axe to grind with Karunanidhi remains publicly loyal to the Chief Minister, Congress "will carry this grudge and retaliate at the right time." As evidence of the hurt feelings, Maran alleged that Sonia Gandhi recently refused to meet with Karunanidhi's daughter Kanimozhi, who is a DMK Member of Parliament. Maran also said that a faction of the Congress Party leadership, including Rahul Gandhi, wishes to see Tamil Tiger chief Prabhakaran dead in retaliation for killing Rajiv Gandhi, which drives a wedge between Congress and the DMK over Sri Lanka.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Karunanidhi's DMK and Congress are bound together by mutual self-interest. Karunanidhi needs Congress to remain Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and Congress relies on the DMK to keep the UPA in power in New Delhi. As a result, it is no surprise that the political drama Karunanidhi generated quietly concluded with no resignations after the Indian government took sufficient steps to give him enough political cover to save face. Despite the posturing from state-level politicians and the influential Tamil film industry, the episode stands out mostly for what we did not see. Although Karunanidhi has been criticized by political opponents for not taking an even stronger stance with the central government over Sri Lanka, those opponents do not seem to be getting much traction. Support for the Sri Lankan Tamils has not become a burning issue with the public in Tamil Nadu. The DMK's much-hyped "human chain" in solidarity with the island's Tamils saw anemic participation, and the arrest of politicians supportive of the Tamil Tigers passed without any outpouring of support for the cause. The legacy of revulsion over Rajiv Gandhi's assassination continues to loom large over Tamil Nadu.

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